During the past seventeen years, there were three major changes in Thailand’s electoral system. These abrupt changes raised an intriguing question of what factors constituted the resulting breakdown of electoral reform in Thailand. “Politics of Electoral Reform in Thailand” aims to describe the electoral reform process, analyze the reformers’ expectations, and evaluate the effects and limitations of the attempted reform. The methodologies applied in this study are documentary analysis and field research.

Chapter 2 of this study provides the historical background to how the electoral and political reforms came about and demonstrates their roots in the long democratic transition since the transformation to Constitutional Monarchy in 1932. Then chapter 3 explores the background and agenda of the drastic 1997 electoral reform and its transformative effects. Much attention is directed at the effects of adopting proportional representation (PR) and single-member district (SMD) electoral systems. The chapter also illustrates the reform’s effects on the political party system, parties’ strategies, and modes of electoral competition, political engagement and voter turnout. A comparison between the 1997 and the 2007 Constitutions on the subjects of electoral systems and electoral rules is presented in chapter 4. The chapter also demonstrates that the 2007 electoral changes under the new constitution were products brought into play by traditional, conformist groups of elites. Chapter 5 proceeds to show the details of how the 2007 constitutional amendments on the electoral system, and the results of the subsequent general election in 2011, deepened conflicts that echoed disagreements on goals and expectations of what the electoral reform was supposed to accomplish. The chapter will also touch on the 2014 general election that was eventually nullified and its connotation. Chapter 6 focuses on the voters’ behavior and electoral decisions. Data shown in this chapter demonstrate that electoral reform and changes have triggered political awareness among voters; voter turnouts have increased steadily, attitude towards vote buying adjusted, and more importantly, the Thai electorate in general have become more strategic voters. The evidence has shown that democratic embedment in Thailand has begun especially among the mass majority. The concluding chapter provides a critical assessment of the past electoral reform in Thailand and the fact that the conflicting goals of reformers, arbitrary imposition, and too frequent reform led to paradoxical outcomes.

“Politics of Electoral Reform in Thailand” constructs three major findings. First, the crucial consequence of the 1997 electoral reform was the driving force moving Thailand towards a front row of fledgling and transitional democracies. The upshot of the reform was an era of growing political awareness and the recognition of the people’s
power in electing the government leadership and representatives of the parliament’s two houses. The 2007 electoral reform, on the contrary, shifted the focus from a reform for empowering the people to a reform for diverting the effects of the previous reform. The result was the pendulum swings from the commencement of a democratic rooting to authorizing the traditional powers in the form of unelected bodies in the political filed. Not only did the electoral reform create paradoxical outcomes exceeding the reformers’ expectations, but the reformers were also governed by contradicted intentions that made the process of electoral reform a paradox in itself.

Second, the apparently positive effects of the electoral reform included the decline in political party fragmentation, a stronger core party in the government, a shift from candidate-oriented to party- and policy-oriented parties, and an increased bonding between the political parties and the electorate. However, the drawbacks manifested in diminished social inclusiveness and representation with a higher concentration of the elite classes in the parliament, continued personalized party leadership, and the dominance of big capital over political parties. Taken together, the significant changes in the mode of party competition did not convert into the institutionalization of a party system.

Third, the encouraging and disappointing effects of electoral reform were not only shaped by the mechanisms of the electoral system and electoral engineering, but also by socio-political contexts, especially the lingering, highly polarized conflicts of the past thirteen years. Despite the elite dominated reform, inconsistencies in what the reformers wanted to achieve and the recent coup d’état, the study maintains that the vital effect of electoral reform was the gradual transition to democracy. The upsurge of popular power will eventually outlast the democratic crises and undemocratic attempts to suppress it. The only way to make reform legitimate and endure is to involve the politically awakened mass majority in the process through peaceful elections.

Drawing from Thailand’s past experiences in electoral reform, the study suggests seven considerations for the reform in the future. They are 1) The setting and environment of electoral reform is of great importance; 2) Assurance of inclusiveness; 3) Adequate representation; 4) Increasing government’s and representatives’ accountability to the voters; 5) Maintaining the importance of political parties; 6) Making elections meaningful; and 7) Being mindful of international standards.